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Artistic Labor and Precarity: Lessons from the Brussels' Contemporary Dance Scene

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Abstract:

At the intersection of sociology of art, culture and labor, research has been conducted into artistic careers and working conditions, yet the field of contemporary dance remains understudied. Even a superficial acquaintance with this field suggests that most contemporary dance artists are in a precarious professional situation. They are job-hoppers who mostly have only temporary contracts, are not well paid, perform many hours of unpaid labor... In this presentation we try to analyze this multi-dimensional situation of precarity on the basis of data obtained within the thriving Brussels' contemporary dance scene, which is highly internationalized from the point of view of both its internal composition and professional networks.

We will combine quantitative and qualitative data. The first stem from an e-survey conducted among members of the Brussels' contemporary dance scene in Spring 2015 on their average income and its eventual fluctuations, general working conditions (including social benefits), and other relevant topics. One of our main findings regards the outspoken difference between those who do not and those who do have the so-called artist-status that exists within the context of the Belgian social security system. After totaling a number of working days, this status offers artists in principle unlimited unemployment benefits when not working.

On the basis of our survey, we selected a limited number of Brussels' dance artists for the ongoing qualitative phase, which includes in-depth interviews and on the site observations of the work process. The combination of the interim-results of this field work with the results of the e-survey allow us to discuss in a more empirical way the notion of precarious labor. Precarity has become a much invoked concept in the contemporary discussions of the nature of artistic labor. Thus, Bojana Kunst contends that the actual working conditions and the present aesthetics within contemporary dance cannot be separated. Since the origins of the word 'precarious' refer to Roman law, in which the adverb 'precario' indicates that the right to live in a certain place may be withdrawn at any time, we want to focus particularly on the link between precarity and temporality. According to Guy Standing, the lack of control over time is a key feature of the alleged 'precariat', which he depicts as an emerging class-in-the-making. In our view, dance artists' precarity implies that they are in a constant state of temporality, perhaps to the extent that one may speak of temporary rather than *contemporary* dance artists.